

Vermont Department of Mental Health Mental Health Minute

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Current Topic: Emergency Department Use for Youth Experiencing Mental Health Crises

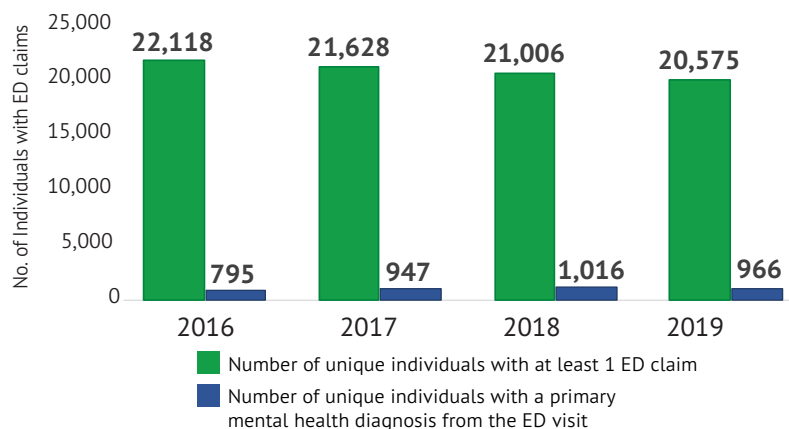
When children are experiencing a mental health crisis such as suicidal behavior, psychosis, or aggression, many families turn to their local hospital and Emergency Department (ED) for care. Nationally, about 8-10% of pediatric visits to an ED are primarily for mental health reasons.¹ Using EDs in this way can be a lifesaving choice when there is acute concern about someone's safety or when possible nonpsychiatric causes of behavioral symptoms (poisonings,

infections, etc.) need to be evaluated urgently. However, EDs also commonly involve long waits in a place that most people do not find particularly therapeutic. EDs are also an extremely expensive setting for care. Knowing when to use Emergency Departments for mental health problems and when to use other avenues for care can be very useful in ensuring that a child gets the timely and most appropriate care they deserve.

What are the overall trends in Vermont?

An analysis of emergency department insurance claims in Vermont and New Hampshire for Vermont residents under the age of 18 between the years 2016 to 2019 was recently conducted. During that time, the overall number of ED visits for any reason fell from 22,118 in 2016 to 20,575 in 2019. However, the number of pediatric ED visits primarily for a mental health concern rose from 795 to 966, a 17.7% increase, as shown in the figure. This increase occurred despite there being slightly fewer children in Vermont in 2019 compared to 2016.

Number of Vermont Children with ED Claims with a Primary Mental Health Diagnosis Code

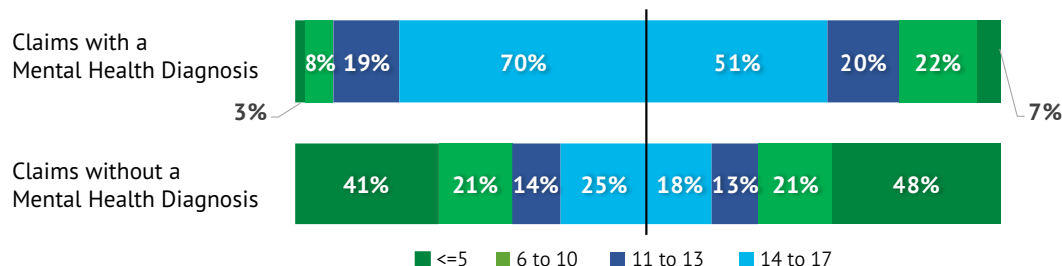


Who are the children coming to Emergency Departments for mental health reasons?

Among children who come to Emergency Departments with a mental health concern, 54% are female. As shown in the figure, adolescence is the most common age group to require emergency mental health assessment and

treatment and within this age group about 70% are female. These gender differences are reversed for younger ages where those presenting to EDs are more likely to be boys.

Distribution of Pediatric Emergency Department Claims, by Sex and Age Group, 2016-2019



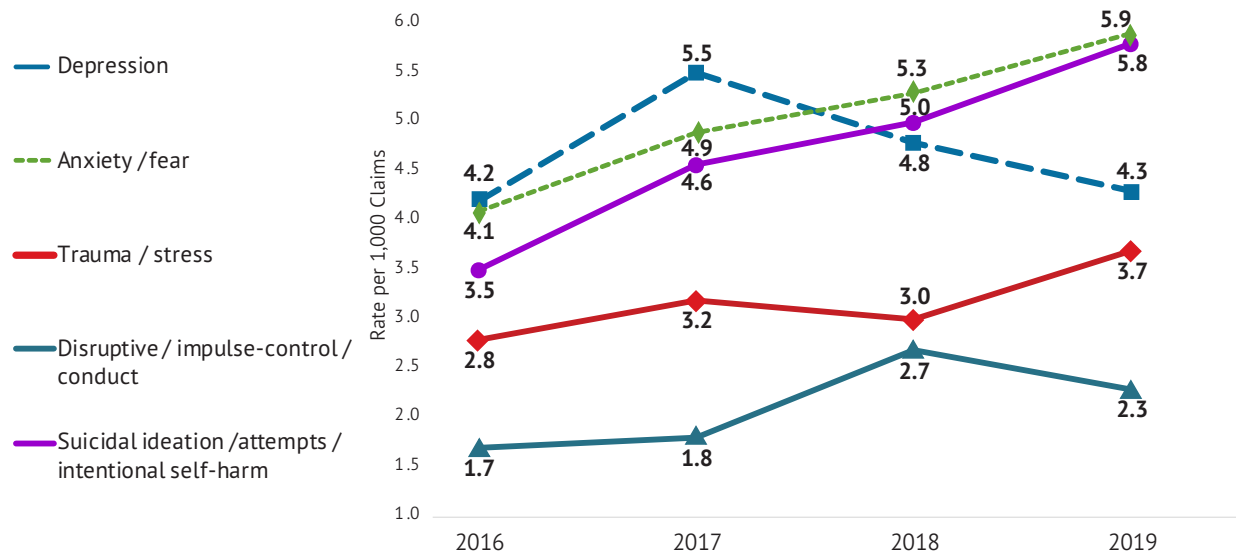
¹ Vermont Health Care Uniform Reporting and Evaluation System (VHCURES) owned by Green Mountain Care Board. Analyses performed by Vermont Departments of Mental Health and Health epidemiologist, Laurin Kasehagen, MA, PhD.

What are types of mental health concerns that lead Vermont children to go to Emergency Departments?

Suicidal thoughts and behaviors as well as anxiety are the most common reasons children go to EDs and the rate of these problems has been increasing from 2016 to 2019. Trauma related conditions such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and disruptive and conduct disorders (which

might include youth who come to the ED due to aggressive and dysregulated behavior), were also common. Cannabis related disorders had decreased as the primary reason for ED visits between 2017 to 2018, but then nearly doubled from 2018 to 2019 (from 0.9 to 1.7 per 1,000 claims).

Rate of Pediatric Mental Health Related Emergency Department Claims using the Primary Diagnosis Code



What can we do to make the best use of our Emergency Departments?

If a child is in immediate danger or experiencing a life threatening emergency due to a mental health problem, then dialing 9-1-1 or taking them to the nearest Emergency Department certainly makes sense. If a child needs urgent mental health attention but is not in acute danger, however, parents and other caregivers might well consider some alternative steps. For those who already have mental health treatment in the community, a call to the treating counselor or psychiatrist can help you decide what is the

best next step to take. Most mental health professionals make provisions to be available or to have a covering clinician available after hours. You can also call your region's emergency mental health services to talk to a mental health professional right away². It is good to have that number handy if your child may need those services. If you don't know the number, you can call 2-1-1. In many cases, families can get the assistance they need without having to go to an ED.

How to get the most out of an Emergency Department visit

Going to an Emergency Department for a child experiencing a mental health crisis can be a challenging and stressful experience. If you do go to an Emergency Department, it is okay to ask questions. You can get the support you need, such as translation services for people for whom English is not their primary language. There often are a lot of restrictions on your child to help keep them safe, and there can be many different types of people who interact with

the family. A brochure to help manage your ED visit is available and free to download at https://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/sites/mhnew/files/documents/Services/ES/Emergency_Crisis_Brochure_REV6.pdf. Many EDs are supplied with the brochure already and you can ask for it on site.



References & Other Resources

1. Pittsenbarger ZE, et al. Trends in pediatric visits to the emergency department for psychiatric illnesses. Acad Emerg Med. 2014;21:25-30.
2. Emergency Services numbers by region: <https://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/services/emergency-services/how-get-help>.

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